

The Kuril Islands Dispute Between Russia and Japan

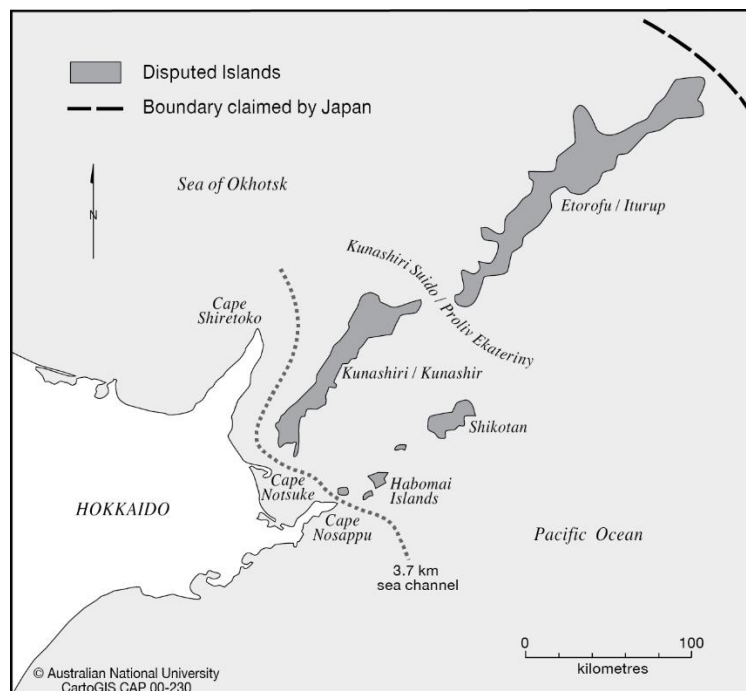
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Midwest Slavic Conference 2019

### The Geographic Situation of the Kuril Islands

Since the turn of the seventeenth century, Russia and Japan have quarreled over the ownership of the Kuril Islands, or Northern Territories (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 8-9). As the author is a student of Russian studies, the Russian terms will be used more frequently throughout this work, although this does not reflect a bias of opinion regarding the legitimacy of either side. These islands, situated at either the “northern edge of the Japanese archipelago (“Northern Territories”) or the “southern edge of Russia’s Kuril Islands” (Yorgason, 2017, p. 205), are the bane of Russo-Japanese relations (Hasegawa, 1992, p. 2), being the principle reason the two nations have failed to complete a peace treaty since the end of World War II (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 4; Zinberg, 1997, p. 89). The dispute is also known as the Four Islands Dispute (Zinberg, 1998, p. 86) because the dispute is over the islands Kunashir (Kunashiri in Japan), Iturup (Etorofu in Japan), Shikotan, and the group of small islands collectively known as the Habomais (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 4).



The Kuril Islands. (Australian National University, 2018)

Situated in “close proximity” to Japan (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 5), the disputed islands are claimed by Russia as part of the Southern Kurils in the Sakhalin Oblast (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 5) and by Japan as part of the Hokkaido Prefecture (Okuyama, 2003, p. 42). While economically important for fishing, as the waters surrounding them are some of the world’s “richest fishing areas” (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 7), their true importance lies in their strategic value. These islands separate the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean, meaning that whichever nation controls these islands also controls economic and military activity between these waters (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 7-8).



Historical borders. (Proehl, 2010)

### The Curve of the Conflict

## **From Peace to War: A Brief Exploration of the Conflict Until the Soviet Union's Collapse**

The conflict has experienced all stages of the curve of conflict in its history, although it has remained in stages of unstable and stable peace since the 1990s. Although early Russian explorers to the Kurils and the Japanese mainland were treated “amicably” by the Japanese (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 16), this began to change in the mid to late 1700s, when Catherine the Great began supervising Russian activity in the Kurils (Hasegawa, 1998, p.17-18). This stable peace was jeopardized until the Shimoda Treaty of 1855 established diplomatic relations and designated a border between Iturup and Urup (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 24). The Shimoda Treaty de-escalated tensions to a state of stable peace, the designated border remaining until the end of World War II.

The conflict escalated briefly to a crisis that culminated in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 29) to settle back into a stable peace in the post-war period until the conflict again escalated to war in World War II (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 30-31, 43). Promised the Kurils at the 1945 Yalta Conference (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 8), the Soviet Union annexed the islands immediately after the war (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 76-77). However, at the 1951 peace conference in San Francisco, the United States and El Salvador stipulated that the islands not be given to the Soviet Union, causing the Soviet Union to refuse to sign the treaty (Treaty of Peace with Japan, 1951). Since that point, there has not been a peace treaty signed between the Soviet Union (now Russia) and Japan (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 4; Zinberg, 1997, p. 89). However, the two countries signed a Joint Declaration in 1956, in which the Soviet Union offered to cede Shikotan and the Habomai Islands to Japan – with the completion of a peace treaty as a prerequisite (Jung, Yoon, and Jeh, 2015, p. 264).

## **Towards a Durable Peace? Attempts at Settlement in the 1990s**

During and beyond the 1990s, the conflict between Russia and Japan over the Kuril Islands has fluctuated between unstable and stable peace, with unsuccessful attempts to create a durable peace. As the Soviet Union fell, relations between it and Japan seemed to be heading towards stable or even durable peace. For example, in April of 1991, President Mikhail Gorbachev and Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu held a summit (Song, 1992, p. 108) in which they created a visa-free exchange program that would allow both Russian and Japanese citizens to visit the disputed islands (Zinberg, 1997, p. 89-90). The Joint Declaration signed by Gorbachev and Kaifu in 1991 was monumental, as it was the first time the Soviet Union officially recognized that there even was a territorial disagreement (Song, 1992, p. 105). The following year, President Boris Yeltsin announced a “Five-Step Solution” toward resolving the dispute, beginning by withdrawing the Soviet military presence from the islands (Okuyama, 2003, p. 39).

This stable peace was jeopardized in the same year by Governor Valentin Fyodorov of Sakhalin, who announced that he refused to support “any settlement that would end up with the loss of Russian territory” (Okuyama, 2003, p. 42). Fyodorov’s counterpart, Governor Takayuki Yokomichi of Hokkaido, on the other hand, was determined to implement the visa-free exchange program to “foster regional cooperation by practical methods” (Okuyama, 2003, p. 44). However, the 1993 Tokyo Declaration reaffirmed both states’ commitment to a peace treaty through resolution of the dispute (Zinberg, 1997, p. 90). At this summit, Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa encouraged the separation of political and economic issues to produce “an atmosphere of economic cooperation” (Okuyama, 2003, p. 41). At the regional level, the Economic Department of Sakhalin created a “general plan for socio-economic development” for the Kuril Islands based upon foreign investment, which in practice would mean Japanese investment

(Okuyama, 2003, p. 42-43). The early years of the Russian Federation were marked by mostly hopeful preludes towards a consistently stable peace.

However, relations between the two countries stagnated until 1996, when the Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov visited Japan with the goals of expanding political and economic ties while coming to new agreements regarding the territorial dispute. Looking to a similar arrangement between the United Kingdom and Argentina over the Falkland Islands, Primakov officially suggested a plan of “joint development” of the islands (Zinberg, 1997, p. 90-91). In the case of the Falkland, or Malvinas, Islands, the two governments established a special economic zone around the Patagonian shelf for “joint exploration and development” in order to improve bilateral relations (Dodds, 1998, p. 624). Nevertheless, the 1996 “Fundamental Principles of Russia’s Frontier Policies” linked the Russian frontier with the territory of the former USSR, pushing them back towards a more unstable peace (Zinberg, 1997, p. 91). The Gorbachev-Kaifu Summit was followed by the 1997 Krasnoyarsk Summit between President Boris Yeltsin and Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, at which the two leaders agreed to conclude a peace treaty by 2000 (Zinberg, 1997, p. 89; Okuyama, 2003, p. 40). In 1998 came the Moscow Declaration, which furthered the notion of a Russo-Japanese “creative partnership” (Zinberg, 1998, p. 86), including plans for a “joint fishery complex” in the Kuril Islands (Okuyama, 2003, p. 41).

### **The New Century and the Kuril Island Dispute**

As the year 2000 neared, agreements over the Kuril Islands were still at a stalemate. Because of this, there were many offers of continuing to conclude the treaty while “deferring” a decision on the territorial dispute (Zinberg, 1998, p. 88). Alas, the 2000 deadline for a peace treaty came and went without any “radical changes” (Shapovalova, 2013, p. 243). However, relations between the two countries improved with the inauguration of President Vladimir Putin in 2000

(Shapovalova, 2013, p. 242). In the Irkutsk Statement of 2001, he and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori confirmed that the proposed settlement under the Joint Declaration of 1956, under which Russia would cede Shikotan and the Habomais to Japan, was still on the table. The election of Junichiro Koizumi later that year, however, caused a shift to firmer policies (Shapovalova, 2013, p. 244), encouraging restricted economic engagement to “pressure” Russia (Burrett, 2014, p. 374).

Japanese business interests in the following years forced Japan to back off in 2003 (Shapovalova, 2013, p. 244; Burrett, 2014, p. 374). This shift coincided with Putin’s announcement of Russia’s energy sector as an “instrument” for public policy (Diesen, 2018, p. 593). However, a 2006 comment by the Russian Foreign Ministry asserted that Japan’s claims to the islands “undermine the bases of the postwar arrangements” (Yorgason, 2017, p. 210). As this reflects adherence to the informal Yalta Agreement (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 8), rather than the San Francisco Peace Treaty (Treaty of Peace with Japan, 1951), this indicates a lack of commitment towards durable peace.

### **Wavering Between Stable and Unstable Peace: Japan’s Volatility**

The increase in economic interdependence was challenged as oil prices rose, improving living conditions in the underdeveloped Russian Far East. As the need for Japanese investment declined, so did discussion of the issue within Russia (Shapovalova, 2013, p. 244-245). In response, the Japanese government and media collaborated on a “massive” campaign to bring the issue into the international spotlight in 2009 and 2010 (Shapovalova, 2013, p. 245), not unlike a 2012 campaign by the Argentinian government regarding the Falklands Island dispute with the United Kingdom (Pinkerton and Benwell, 2014, p. 12). Japan’s efforts were not successful, as Russia responded by treating the dispute as a non-issue – in 2009, its Foreign Ministry declared it

a “well-known fact” that the islands were passed to the Soviet Union “on legal grounds” following World War II (Shapovalova, 2013, p. 245), again ignoring the San Francisco Peace Treaty.

During this campaign, the Japanese government was brought under the leadership of Naoto Kan, beginning a “fresh spiral of tensions” (Shapovalova, 2013, p. 245) particularly after Russian President Dmitry Medvedev’s 2010 visit to Kunashir (Shapovalova, 2013, p. 246). Diplomatic relations between the two stagnated until tragedy struck Japan in 2011 in the form of an earthquake, tsunami, and accident at a nuclear power plant (Shapovalova, 2013, p. 246). A shift in relations from unstable peace to stable peace began with Vladimir Putin’s return to office in 2012, particularly as Shinzo Abe returned to office in the same year (Burrett, 2014, p. 360-361). Both leaders met in 2013 to announce the “resumption of negotiations” over the islands (Burrett, 2014, p. 361). The continued attempts by Putin and Abe to improve Russo-Japanese relations has not stopped since the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea. In fact, Abe has kept his comments on the crisis “to a minimum” (Burrett, 2014, p. 361-362).

### **Post-Crimea Relations: Stable Peace Under Fire**

Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and subsequent shunning by the West marked an important point in the nation’s pivot towards Asia. This was coupled with an improvement of relations with Japan through increased economic integration (Diesen, 2018, p. 583). These apparent moves towards a durable peace have been interrupted, however, pushing the dispute back to an unstable peace and even towards crisis. In February 2017, the Russian defense minister announced plans to deploy “additional forces” to the Kuril Islands – soon after the government named five of the uninhabited islands in the chain (International Crisis Group, 2017). The media was utilized in a similar way in the late 2000s, after British companies began drilling for oil in the waters around the Falkland Islands. The Argentinian government under Cristina Fernández de



Kirchner broadcasted these actions in order to augment their significance in the eyes of Argentinians (Benwell and Dodds, 2011, p. 442). In the same way, the naming of the islands solidifies Russia's claim to them and ties them to Russian nationalism.

Relations between Russia and the West have declined since the 2014 Crimean invasion, putting Prime Minister Abe in an "awkward position" as he tries to navigate both sets of relations (Brown, 2018, p. 2-3). This was particularly obvious with regards to Japan's response to the (probably Kremlin-backed) poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in 2018, as Japan's name was noticeably absent from the list of twenty-eight countries who expelled diplomats during the ensuing international outrage (Brown, 2018, p. 2-3).

### **2019: Resolution at Last?**

Putin and Abe met on November 14, 2018 to discuss the issue anew ("In meeting with Putin...", 2018). They declared that the Joint Declaration of 1956 would be the basis of all further talks (Reynolds and Kravchenko, 2018), under which Russia would cede Shikotan and the Habomais to Japan (Jung, Yoon, and Jeh, 2015, p. 264). Citing a "new level of cooperation" from this meeting, Abe stated that "this issue, which has existed for more than 70 years since the end of the war, will be solved by Putin and me, and not left for the next generation" (Reynolds and Kravchenko, 2018). 2018 concluded without further talks on the matter, although both designated that their foreign ministers meet to "oversee negotiations" for concluding the peace treaty ("Shinzo Abe and Vladimir Putin...", 2018)

However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov presented a conflicting image after his January 14 meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono, stating that returning part of the territory to Japan is "not up for debate" (Aljazeera, 2019). Putin and Abe met again on January 22 of this year to discuss the issue, sparking protests across Russia in cities such as Moscow,

Khabarovsk, Kaliningrad, and Sakhalinsk, capital of Sakhalin Island (RFE/RL's Russian Service, 2019). "Left-leaning" and nationalist groups spoke out against a possible Russian cession of Shikotan and the Habomais – one attendee, Igor Skurlatov, passionately stated, "Today we give away the Kurils, tomorrow we give away Crimea" (RFE/RL's Russian Service, 2019). Public opinion polls show that two thirds of Russians do not want to return the Kurils to Japan (Trenin, 2019), endangering Putin's plans for peaceful resolution.

### **An Analytical Framework of the Conflict**

#### **Actors**

The primary actors in the dispute over the Kuril Islands, or Northern Territories, are the governments of Japan, today under President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Almost as influential are the governments of Sakhalin and Hokkaido, the regions closest to the islands in each competing state (Okuyama, 2003, p. 42), as well as the residents of those districts. Also central to the debate (but rarely discussed) are the original inhabitants of the islands, the Ainu, whose "way of life" was destroyed by Russian and Japanese explorers dating back to the eighteenth century (Mangi, 2002, p. 60). Finally, China, the United States, and other Western nations also have influence over events due to their relationships with the primary actors. As major allies of Russia and Japan, respectively, China and the United States would both like to see the dispute resolved in their ally's favor (Trenin and Weber, 2012, p. 14; Diesen, 2018, p. 582).

#### **Root Causes**

The conflict is driven by the absence of a Russo-Japanese peace treaty since the end of World War II (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 4), although there were serious efforts to do so in the 1990s (Zinberg, 1997, p. 89; Okuyama, 2003, p. 40). Russia has held de facto control of the islands since the Soviet Union claimed them at the conclusion of World War II (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 8) without

the approval of the international community (Treaty of Peace with Japan, 1951). The conflict has continued for so long because its resolution will force Russia to “give up more” and Japan to “receive less” than either side anticipates (Trenin and Weber, 2012, p. 8).

### **Issues, Scope, and Stage**

Since the Joint Declaration of 1956, the primary goal of Japanese foreign policy has been to conclude both the dispute and a peace treaty for the mutual benefit of both sides (Mangi, 2002, p. 59). Along with advancing Japan’s security in Asia (Trenin and Weber, 2012, p. 14) through political and security dialogue between the two countries, the augmentation of economic relations (Brown, 2018, p. 1-2) would assist Russia in developing its Far East (Wohns, 2013, p. 9). Additionally, resolution of the dispute would weaken Japan’s far-right movement, a thorn in the side of Japanese policy in recent years (Wohns, 2013, p. 9). Now over 70 years since Japan has held the islands, many Japanese have moderated their opinions on the issue. Japan would like the dispute to be resolved as soon as possible, even if it means only receiving sovereignty over Shikotan and the Habomais (Brown, 2018, p. 1; Mangi, 2002, p. 59). Although the conflict has wavered around stable peace, for the resolution of the dispute to be successful, the Kuril Islands must be purged of both Russian and Japanese military equipment (Trenin and Weber, 2012, p. 12).

There are three groups of people who are suffering substantially due to the ongoing dispute. The first is the Japanese who were displaced from their homes during the Soviet occupation of the islands 70 years ago (Wohns, 2013, p. 9), followed by those who live on the islands now, as the islands’ economies are very underdeveloped (Okuyama, 2003, p. 46; Wohns, 2013, p. 9). Finally, the Ainu, who live on the islands themselves and in the neighboring districts, suffer the same problems as the groups listed above while not being given an adequate stake in the debate (Kawashima, 2004, p. 21).

## **Power, Resources, and Relationships**

As stated above, Russia has the capacity to bolster Japanese security in Asia (Trenin and Weber, 2012, p. 14), while Japan has the resources to enhance Russia's underdeveloped eastern economy (Wohns, 2013, p. 9). Additionally, a Russo-Japanese alliance would boost both Japan's and Russia's defense positions in Asia, as well as the security of the region as a whole (Trenin and Weber, 2012, p. 9, 13-14). Russia feels threatened by the heavy American presence in the region – Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov goes so far as to cite Japan as dependent upon the United States (Aljazeera, 2019). Closer relations with Russia will allow Japan to become more autonomous from the United States. If the opposite happens, both sides will polarize further – Russia to China and Japan to the United States. This outcome is dangerous, considering that the “confrontation” between the United States and China is only mounting (Trenin, 2019).

It is clear from Putin's rhetoric over the course of his presidency, such as his interest in the energy sector in 2003 (Diesen, 2018, p. 593) and his ambitious plans to “boost Russia's standing” in the World Bank (Trenin and Weber, 2012, p. 9), that he is interested in developing Russia's economy. Not only would Japan expand markets for Russian goods, but their collaboration would transform the Russian economy into one that “thrives” on education and technology (Trenin and Weber, 2012, p. 9). Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono is adamant that solving the territorial dispute is a prerequisite for the expansion of “economic and other ties” (Aljazeera, 2019).

With the return of Putin and Abe in 2012 came a “marked improvement” in Russo-Japanese relations (Burrett, 2014, p. 360). Putin's positive predisposition towards Japan (Brown, 2018, p. 4), as well as Abe's “new approach” to engaging Russia politically and economically, both suggest a strong relationship (Brown, 2018, p. 1). This is supported by the amount of dialogue held between the two, as their November 2018 meeting was their twenty-third while in office (Reynolds and

Kravchenko, 2018). With both leaders nearing the ends of their terms – Abe will leave office “no later than 2021,” while Putin will remain until 2024 – if an agreement is to be made, it must be made in 2019 (Trenin 2019). Even with the goodwill the two have fostered since 2012, it will take time to convince their constituents to support any deal they create. To provide enough time for ratification, the agreement needs to be solidified this year (Trenin, 2019).

### **History of the Relationship**

The parties coexisted peacefully during the Russo-Japanese Entente of 1906 to 1914 and their subsequent alliance of 1916 during World War I (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 30-32). There have been many previous attempts at settlement dating back to the Shimoda Treaty of 1855 (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 26), which fell apart during the Russo-Japanese War that began in 1904 (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 29). Since World War II, there has been a long list of failed attempts at resolution, starting with the Joint Declaration of 1956. Although this remains the most feasible plan for settlement, its prerequisite requirement of a peace treaty has prevented its implementation (Jung, Yoon and Jeh, 2015, p. 264). The main attempts since 1956 have been the Joint Declaration of 1991 (Song, 1992, p. 105), followed by Yeltsin’s Five-Step Solution in 1992 (Okuyama, 2003, p. 38-39); the Krasnoyarsk Summit of 1997 (Zinberg, 1997, p. 89), and the Moscow Declaration of 1998 (Zinberg, 1998, p. 86). The clear pattern to these failures has been the absence of a peace treaty concluding World War II (Hasegawa, 1998, p. 4; Zinberg, 1997, p. 89).

Although the relations between Russia and Japan have improved substantially since the days of the Soviet Union, the longevity of the dispute means there is still a long way to go towards resolution. Recent events between Ukraine and Russia (BBC, November 26, 2018) have further complicated Russia’s relationship with the West (BBC, November 29, 2018), although both

leaders seem determined to conclude a peace treaty before their time in office ends. Not only will Putin and Abe need to agree on the terms of such a treaty, but these terms must be supported by their constituents. The protests that rocked cities across Russia earlier this year testify to the challenges that will need to be overcome before peace is achieved.

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